

4th Sunday of Easter – May 15, 2011 – Acts 2: 42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2: 19-25; **John 10: 1-18**

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

The shepherd image is included in three of today's readings: in the 23rd Psalm – used as our Call to Worship and so familiar to all of you – in First Peter to describe the relationship we are to have with Christ – and in chapter ten of John's gospel as one of the metaphors Jesus employs to help his followers understand who he is.

For me and for many of you this image doesn't have a lot of content, aside from the understanding that shepherds are people who take care of sheep. We have little idea what's involved in that. The picture that comes to our minds likely doesn't have a whole lot to do with what Jesus is talking about here.

We can become distracted by this metaphor into thinking of ourselves as sheep – that perhaps followers of Jesus are intended to be like sheep. If Jesus is portrayed as a good shepherd, then by extension am I depicted as a sheep? Sheep aren't exactly clever are they? I've heard it said that God created sheep in order to make chickens look smart – perhaps, perhaps not – the point is that I don't want to be described as a sheep! Does God want us to be sheep? Are we to aspire to complacent, flock mentality? Are we to embrace docility and defenselessness?

Let's remember that the image is pointing to Jesus and not to you and me. These representations of the *Lord as Shepherd*, of *Jesus the Good Shepherd* are not so much about the sheep as they are about the shepherd. These images are to reveal the nature of God – the attentiveness of our Lord – the sacrifice of Jesus.

The metaphor of the divine shepherd appears in many Old Testament references, including Psalm 100 and chapters 34 and 37 of Ezekiel. This should not surprise us because the ancient Israelites to whom the Old Testament authors looked for their definitive traditions were primarily a pastoral people with their chief wealth represented by their flocks. During their early history, they depended on flocks of sheep for most aspects of their livelihood including food, clothing, a medium of exchange and the central offering of ritual sacrifice. Even today in the many parts of the world – including the Middle East – one often sees shepherds with their flocks large or small on roads or hillsides very near to urban centers.

To follow the metaphor we must think of a sheepfold. Imagine a rolling plain, dotted with humps and hillocks. Dusk descends, and the shepherd leads his flock into the sheepfold. One of the hillocks has been hollowed out, and the sheep huddle inside next to the sheep of several other shepherds who share this particular fold. Every village has a common sheepfold where flocks find shelter at night, especially in winter. A pair of piled rock walls extends out a few feet from the sides of the hill. If you saw someone climbing over the walls of a sheepfold, you could be reasonably sure of one thing – it is probably not the shepherd but a thief. There is only one legitimate point of entry – the doorway or the gate. The shepherd lies down in the space between the low walls, effectively sealing the enclosure – keeping wild animals from getting in or restless sheep from getting out. Thieves and bandits and wolves will have a difficult time entering with the shepherds on guard. The sheep are safe in the sheepfold.

In the details of the passage from the Gospel of John we find an understanding of the life of humble shepherds in Jesus' day. There was an intimate, personal and affectionate relationship between shepherd and flock. Sheep were precious creatures. A flock of 100 was extra large. Many flocks numbered no more than 10 to 20. The sheep knew their shepherd's

voice and followed willingly. The shepherd knew each by name. Day and night the shepherd lived with them. The shepherd was always there for them – prepared to risk life and limb to save any one of them.

Shepherds had a hard life, since they faced all of the hardships of the hostile landscape through which they herded their sheep. Being with the flock, they faced all of the dangers and difficulties that the flock faced, and they were just as vulnerable – to heat in the day – to cold at night – to human and animal predators at all times. They slept with their flocks on nights when there were few enough predators for them to sleep at all – they were seen as poor prospects as husbands and fathers, since they had to leave their families alone and vulnerable at night as well.

In the morning each shepherd stood at the gate and called his own sheep from the communal flock. Responding only to their own shepherd's peculiar call, the sheep filed out to be led away to feed wherever pasture could be found. The sheep can't spend their whole lives in the sheepfold, no matter how safe the enclosure may be. There's no food in the fold, after all. Often it was necessary to lead the flocks far into the hills to forage for grass. The sheep may be comfortable and safe, but the sheep must follow the shepherd out of the fold in order to find sustenance, in order to live.

In our reading Jesus uses two images to describe himself: "*I am the good shepherd*" and "*I am the gate for the sheep.*" It is confusing for us to hear these two metaphors mixed. He may have meant he was the opening – the doorway – or he may have intended that he was the door itself. When there was no gate, the shepherd's body served instead of a gate or door. The shepherd is the only legitimate point of entry or exit. It is only by his grace that the sheep either come in or go out – literally a case of *over my dead body* since occasionally the shepherd at the gate would be mauled or killed by a wolf pack, or by a lion or a bear. If necessary, the shepherd gave up his life for the flock.

Jesus is both the gate and the shepherd – the one who protects – guards and limits – as well as the one who leads us to green pasture – to abundant life. Some people have thought the sheepfold represents the church but that doesn't seem to fit – especially if church is too separate from the real world. When we retreat to the safety and comfort of our own personal sheepfolds – whatever they may be – even the church – we refuse to participate in the fullness of a life lived in God. Of course, existing in the sheepfold is easier, less demanding. But existence is not life. Ease does not bring joy. And less demanding often means less fulfilling.

We cannot import into our sheepfolds the abundant life that Christ offers us because the very fullness of that life cannot fit inside a safe, comfortable enclosure. Christ brings us out of the sheepfold so that our lives have the opportunity to expand – so that we may embrace God's unrestrained abundance.

You may notice in the Gospel reading that – just as there is more emphasis on the shepherd than on the sheep – there is more emphasis on going out than coming in. The fold is not the natural domain of the sheep – the world is. *He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*

Jesus journeys with the most vulnerable and takes on all of their vulnerability. He knows what it's like to be out in the cold. He knows what he's saying when he calls people to leave their homes and villages, and even their families, since he had done the same himself. He knows what it's like to have people think that you're crazy or irresponsible because of what you leave behind and let go of, because people said the same things about him. That's the

kind of life Jesus lives for and with us. This crazy life he lived, and calls us to live, is abundant life – **the** abundant life God promises.

If we are the flock of Christ, then we are led by Jesus to abundant life in the meadow of the world. Yes, there are places and times of risk in that world, but we are led by Christ who lays down his life to protect us. Out in the sunshine and rain – on smooth roads or rough – toiling or resting – climbing or descending – the shepherd has green pastures to show us if we only allow him to. We will never find those pastures if we hide away in exclusive flocks and huddle in folds where we are never challenged.

There may be times to come into a sheepfold with high stone walls and gather together for warmth and support but most of the time we need to follow the good shepherd into the lush pasture of the world despite the risks we may encounter.

Jesus as a good shepherd is an excellent metaphor. Jesus as the gate – when you understand that being a gate in this context means protecting and limiting those for whom you care – this too is a fine figure of speech. But sheep that take risks?

We are called in Christ to take risks. Jesus took risks all the time. He leads – reveals the way the flock should dare to go. There were likely plenty of voices both around and within Jesus saying “Don’t do it! Don’t stick your neck out. Play it safe. Stay within the cozy boundaries, remain secure.” Yet Jesus went out and took risks to the glory of God.

He left home proclaiming a message that many people did not want to hear. He gathered disciples of questionable standing and background. He associated with undesirable characters like a Roman centurion, despised tax collectors, and foreign women. He touched lepers, violated the Sabbath and spent time in a cemetery with a raving lunatic. He told radical stories, challenged accepted wisdom, and created havoc in the temple market – he was a bit of a rabble-rouser. Our good shepherd is a risk taker and we are called to follow him. Not just where things are virtuous and comfortable, but also where the world appears dangerous and profane.

Jesus is the gate for the fold and leads the flock out onto the slopes. Through him we may eagerly come for rest and through him we dare to go out – to take risks. According to Peter’s letter, Christ is both *shepherd and guardian of our souls*. He knows his own sheep by name – we are not insignificant but precious to him. He leads us to luxuriant pasture – to find nourishment in the sometimes perilous world – to experience and share its abundance.

He leads us together to what we need: food, water, air – true security, deep rest, and real love. Trusting Jesus frees us to enjoy all of those good gifts as fully as God gives them. When the Lord is our shepherd, we experience abundant life that no thief can take away. When Jesus is the gate, there’s no need for us to try to do that job for him, and our anxieties about whether the *wrong* sort of people are getting in are replaced with freedom to love whomever we find ourselves with in the flock. Jesus is our Lord and shepherd and so we need fear no evil – surely, as we follow him, goodness and mercy will follow us.

***I am the good shepherd – I am the gate.
I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly.
You, who know my voice, follow me.***

This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh